

AWICS Housing News – March 2014

Contents:

- **Croydon Council tackles ‘Housing Crisis’**
- **Harrow Council regenerates Francis Road**
- **Perth & Kinross Council improves Housing Offer**
- **Lambeth Council: Co-operatives, Development and Court Challenges**
- **Basildon Council changes residency conditions**
- **National Housing Federation Conferences**
- **Service Charges Seminar & Workshop**



Lambeth Town Hall in Brixton.

Croydon Council tackles ‘Housing Crisis’

In common with most of London, Croydon is facing a ‘housing crisis’. The Council has recently taken steps to address this including changes to policies on allocations, homelessness, sub-letting, rents and maintenance.

In February 2014, estate agents said that property prices in Croydon were ‘spiralling out of control’ in the property boom. Interest in buying a property in Croydon is high especially with the impending arrival of Westfield and Hammerson to the town centre as part of a £1billion redevelopment. According to statistics from property website Rightmove, an average house price in Croydon is £344,715 compared to £294,058 last year.

Perry Langran, Assistant Branch Manager at Haart estate agents told the Housing News that:

"From early April and late March last year it has been spiralling out of control. It is alright for us and alright for sellers but the buyers are getting outbid really. Buyers are struggling a bit at the moment as there is actually a shortage of stock. There is the hype about Westfield and Hammerson coming to Croydon and the new help to buy scheme which has led to a massive influx of buyers since October. All over Croydon there has been interest since the house prices have sky rocketed in London because this to me is probably the biggest town outside of inner London which has great transport links."

Simon Bright, Local Director at Townend’s estate agents, said:

"Croydon is a thriving commercial hub, seen very much as ‘a city outside of the city. Its housing market has always benefitted from dozens of resident blue chip companies, excellent transport networks and a more than average number of schools rated as outstanding by Ofsted. However, over the last twelve months, Croydon has experienced a ‘boom’ in demand, causing the average house price to rise by 18% which I think can be attributed to three things:

- *The increasingly unaffordable nature of central and inner London housing is certainly pushing some people towards the fringes of the city in order to seek more affordable living.*

- *The recovering economy has also contributed to improvements in the local market, driven by increased buyer demand.*
- *And lastly we have certainly experienced a new level of confidence and optimism about the area, which is being dubbed an "investor's hot-spot" for 2014, after large redevelopment plans were unveiled last year."*

In February 2014 it was announced that newcomers to the borough would have to wait five years to be eligible for social housing if the Conservative council is re-elected in May. Social housing is currently allocated according to need and length of time on the waiting list, but Croydon Council said the demand for housing outstrips the supply six times over. Speaking at a public meeting in New Addington, Council leader Mike Fisher said:

"What we want to start consulting on is around a five-year residency rule, so you will have to have lived in the area or had strong local links to the area for around five years. That will go a long way to making sure the homes we have are for local families."

Tony Newman, leader of the council's Labour opposition, told the Croydon Advertiser that Labour would also put policies in place to give local people a better chance of 'benefiting from future growth'. His proposal is that half of new-build affordable housing should be set aside for local people. They should also get first option on local developments and a Labour council would insist new developments contained at least 30% affordable housing.

However, Yus Tunkara, Head of Adult accommodation for homelessness charity Porchlight, that recently started working in Croydon, expressed concerns about a five-year residency rule. He said:

"Many of the individuals and families currently in bed & breakfast and other forms of temporary accommodation in the borough will not meet the five-year residency criteria, so where will they go? Certainly not into a private rented sector which is turning its back on people receiving benefits. People will either need to uproot, putting pressure on another local authority, or stay in limbo at considerable cost to the taxpayer. Many will find themselves with no option but to sleep on the streets."

Basildon District Council has taken a similar decision (see below). The wish to house 'local' people is understandable, but what also needs to be understood is the impact of such policies on other housing applicants.

The Council is to invest in a property fund to buy homes that will ease the borough's housing pressures and provide suitable accommodation for homeless families, it was announced in March 2014. The initial outlay will see £10million invested in Real Lettings, which has been set up in partnership by fund manager Resonance and homelessness charity Broadway. It is expected to secure 94 one and two bed properties in London for the council over the coming months.

The investment is part of the council's 2014/15 capital budget. The fund is designed to produce a return for investors from an increase in property values and rental income. Croydon is the first local authority to invest in the fund, which has a growing pool of investors, mostly housing associations and charitable foundations. Real Lettings offers affordable accommodation in the private rented sector for formerly homeless people.

The council will nominate the tenancies while Broadway will place households in the homes purchased by the fund. If the scheme is successful, there are plans for another £10million investment in the fund later on.

Councillor Dudley Mead, cabinet member for housing, said:

"With house prices going up beyond what is affordable to the council, we have to look at alternative and innovative ways of buying property to increase the supply of housing available to the council. This will ease the pressure on the council in managing homelessness and means we can place families in good quality accommodation as opposed to costly bed and breakfasts."

Susan Fallis, assistant director of services at Broadway Homelessness and Support, said:

"By investing in the Real Lettings Property Fund, Croydon Council is tackling homelessness in the borough head on. Their commitment is helping to ensure homeless families in the area get access to high quality but affordable private rental accommodation that may otherwise have been out of reach."

Daniel Brewer, managing director of Resonance, said:

"Croydon have shown real leadership by using their balance sheet, rather than just relying on increasingly tight revenue budgets, to provide for some of their more vulnerable families. We're hoping a number of other London boroughs will follow suit."

In March 2104 it was announced that the Council's illegal subletting amnesty has led to the keys of three properties being handed back and four reports of suspected housing fraud. The amnesty, which ran throughout February, meant tenants illegally subletting their council homes were able to come forward with the promise that no further action would be taken against them.

The campaign is part of a drive to crack down on tenancy fraud, the majority of which is illegal subletting. It aims to warn people that illegal subletting is now a criminal offence punishable by a two-year prison sentence and a fine. They would also be ordered to pay back to the council any profits they have made. Three properties being illegally sublet in New Addington and Selhurst have now been freed up so they can go to families in need of accommodation. Four further cases of housing fraud were also reported via the council's anti-fraud hotline.

Tenancy fraud costs the taxpayer £90,000 per property when taking into account the potential housing benefit fraud and the cost of keeping other households in temporary accommodation, such as bed and breakfasts. It is estimated nationally that around 98,000 properties may be subject to tenancy fraud, at a cost to the taxpayer of £900million a year. The council wants residents to come forward and report any suspected illegal subletting. Tell-tale signs include post being delivered to properties that doesn't display the named tenant; different people seen coming and going; or locks fitted on internal doors.

Councillor Dudley Mead, cabinet member for housing, said:

“We’re delighted with the successful outcome of the amnesty. But those who think they can get away with illegally subletting their home need to think again. Now the amnesty is finished we will be stepping up our efforts to catch those breaking the law and depriving families of a decent home.”

In January 2014, efforts to tackle rogue landlords and poor-quality private housing received a boost after Croydon Council successfully bid for government funding. Croydon is one of 23 local authorities to have a share of the £4million cash pot that will be used to target squalid and dangerous properties, such as ‘beds in sheds’. The £82,000 funding comes in the wake of recent high-profile incidents involving people living in unsuitable and derelict buildings in the borough. In June last year, a man died in a fire at an abandoned building at The Waldrons, Croydon, while in October 2012 two men had to be rescued from a fire in an outbuilding they were sleeping in at an address in Melfort Road, Thornton Heath. The money will aid the work the council is already doing to tackle the problem.

During the past twelve months the Council has successfully carried out five prosecutions in relation to rogue landlords. Also, two landlords that had turned garages into living accommodation were issued with prohibition orders, to prevent the buildings being occupied. The funding will enable the council to recruit two additional environmental health officers to target buildings likely to attract squatters. Councillor Dudley Mead, cabinet member for housing, said:

“Rogue landlords and poor-quality housing have recently become more of an issue in Croydon, as it has in other boroughs. This funding will enable us to increase our efforts in targeting the buildings and areas at greatest risk, as well as identifying the landlords responsible.”

The Council has also taken steps to improve its offer to its own tenants. Tenants are to benefit from a two-week rent holiday – worth £220 to the average household. In the first fortnight of April, tenants’ rent will be met by the council, unless it is already being met by welfare support. The council recognises that, at this time of year, some households are facing increased living costs, such as higher energy and food bills, and wants to help those not supported by housing benefit to manage their finances and keep debt to a minimum. The rebate will also help tenants manage an average annual rent increase of 4.9%, a proposal recommended by the government to all local authorities, based on the national formula for social housing rents. Councillor Dudley Mead, the council’s cabinet member for housing, said:

“We know that these are challenging times for a number of our tenants, particularly at this time of year, and we want to do all we can to help them. Household budgets are already stretched with high living costs, and we think tenants will welcome the extra money in their pockets.”

The Council awarded a new repairs and maintenance contract to property contractor Axis Europe in February 2014. As part of the initial £10-12million seven year contract, Axis will provide a repairs service to more than 16,000 properties across the borough. It will bring savings of more than £2million a year on the existing deal with Mears and Mitie, which will be reinvested in the council’s housing stock.

Beginning in April, the new contract provides a 24/7 contact centre all year round; a more flexible appointment booking system; online reporting for repairs and a smartphone reporting app. Axis will also provide ten apprenticeships a year, adult training, work placements and jobs for local people. After the initial contract period is up, there will be the opportunity for two further four year extensions. Councillor Dudley Mead, cabinet member for housing, said:

“With up to 70,000 repairs each year, this is a vital service for our 16,000 tenants and leaseholders. This new contract will mean a better service for residents that uses the latest technology and puts something back into the community.”

Croydon Borough Council is a customer of AWICS and frequently supports our seminars and workshops on local authority housing finance and other topics. Further information about our seminars can be found at: <http://www.awics.co.uk/seminars2014.asp>

Harrow Council regenerates Francis Road

Harrow Council tenants at Francis Road saw their newly refurbished housing estate in all its glory in March 2014. The council's 78 flats in Francis Road have been transformed after a £2million regeneration project. Work was carried out over eighteen months mending the facade of the building, installing double glazing and building a new roof. Council cabinet member for housing Barry Macleod-Cullinane said:

“This redevelopment project has ticked off a number of firsts for Harrow Council. It is the first time we have taken on such a massive project without moving residents offsite. I think this project is a great advert for partnership work for improvements which can be made at the council's estates across the borough. I want to thank all the officers involved and the contractor Thomas Sinden for its hard work making this project happen. I also want to thank the previous cabinet members who have helped complete this project.”

The flats were first erected in the 1970s and were falling into disrepair and regeneration work was given the go ahead by the council just over two years ago. To mark the end of the project the Mayor of Harrow Nana Asante unveiled a plaque and planted a cherry tree in front of the completed flats. She said:

“It is a greater pleasure to be here and to see the wonderful work which has been completed. This means residents can really enjoy their home for years to come. Harrow is a wonderful place to live and it is important we make people's homes as comfortable as possible.”

Harrow Council is an AWICS customer. They have frequently sent delegates to our seminars and workshops and we have also provided in-house training in local authority housing finance.

Perth & Kinross Council improves Housing Offer

A positive progress report on the Perth and Kinross Local Housing Strategy was discussed by the council's Housing and Health Committee in December 2013. The Local Housing Strategy provides Perth and Kinross Council and its partners with framework for improving housing locally and addressing local housing need. It focuses on four key areas:

- Addressing housing requirements.
- Promoting sustainable, mixed communities.

Unit 3, Shire Hall, The Sands, Appleby in Westmorland, Cumbria. CA16 6XN.
Telephone: 017683-52165. Mobile: 07502-142658. Twitter @AdrianWaite.
E-Mail: Adrian.waite@awics.co.uk. Website: www.awics.co.uk

Managing Director: Adrian Waite MA CPFA CIHM FInstLM
Registered Address as above. Company Number: 3713554. VAT Registration Number: 721 9669 13

- Improving the condition of housing stock and energy efficiency.
- Helping people with particular needs to get the housing and support they need.

The Committee heard about the progress made under the Local Housing Strategy over the last year, including:

- During 2012/13 a total of 102 new-build properties developed by the council and Social Registered Landlords came on stream, above the target of 100.
- Bids to the Scottish Government have been successful in securing £3.1million in HEEPS-ABS funding to offer private home owners and private landlords energy efficiency work at minimal cost, or in some cases free. These works will initially be carried out in Hillyland, North Muirton and Stanley.
- The council is bringing private sector homes and vacant properties back into use. Twelve properties accessed grant funding totalling £91,000, providing additional affordable rented properties through our Rent Bond Guarantee Scheme. A further two properties have been identified to be developed for flat shares.
- All residents in Perth and Kinross exceeded the target of 90% satisfaction with their house and area / neighbourhood.
- The Scottish House Condition Survey 2009/11 reports that there was a lower proportion of households living in fuel poverty (30% from 34%) and extreme fuel poverty (8% from 9%). There was a higher proportion of dwellings with a National Home Energy efficiency rating of seven or above (46% compared with 41%) compared to the previous year's report.
- The number of properties improved through the council's Scottish Housing Quality Standards delivery plan was 886, exceeding the target of 798.
- The number of houses adapted in Perth and Kinross (734) exceeded the target of 250.
- There was a reduction in the proportion of cases reassessed as homeless or potentially homeless within twelve months of the previous case being completed (1.1% from 2% in the previous year).
- The average time spent in temporary accommodation decreased from 1,628 days in 2011/12 to 865 days in 2012/13.

Housing and Health Convener, Councillor Dave Doogan, said:

"The Local Housing Strategy sets out how we intend to work together with our partners to achieve the improvements required to meet everyone's housing needs more effectively with the resources available to us. I am delighted to see the progress that has been made over the last year. Residents can be assured that the council will continue to work hard, alongside our partners in the social and private rented sectors, to ensure that everyone has access to good quality housing in Perth and Kinross.

"I am particularly happy to see that we are making inroads into tackling fuel poverty. At a time when energy bills are soaring we are committed to ensuring that everyone can live in a warm and comfortable home. It is also very positive to see we are exceeding our targets on the number of new affordable homes being built. We hope to perform even better in this area of work in the coming twelve months.

"It is crucial to the long-term future of the area that we continue to address the key housing issues in Perth and Kinross, so all our communities can benefit from good quality housing in safe and secure neighbourhoods."

The Committee also heard of the positive inspection findings on a number of Housing and Community Care services. A total of 59 quality themes were assessed across the categories of: Care & Support; Environment; Staffing; Management & Leadership. Four quality themes received 'Excellent' assessments (at Homeless Housing Support and Kinnoull Day Opportunities), and 49 received a 'Very Good' or 'Good' rating. Six themes were graded as 'Adequate,' and no services were awarded 'Weak' or 'Unsatisfactory' ratings.

Councillor Dave Doogan, added:

"Overall we can be very proud of the findings of these inspections by SCWIS, which show we are providing quality services to clients in our communities. "I would like to place on record my thanks to all of our dedicated staff members. Their commitment and hard work is reflected in these inspection reports. However, we are never complacent and are constantly looking to improve our services. We will be examining all of these inspection reports to look at ways we can implement positive change."

Council houses in Perth and Kinross are on course to achieve the Scottish Housing Quality Standard by March 2015. Members of the Council's Housing & Health Committee were told in January 2014 that steady progress has been made with the local Standard Delivery Plan during 2013 and the number of houses achieving the Scottish Housing Quality Standard has continued to rise.

As part of the planned programme for the five years from April 2014 to March 2019 that incorporates work needed to achieve the Scottish Housing Quality Standard in 2015, a total investment of £33.5million is being made in:

- Central heating renewal - £11.7million
- Double glazing - £4.9million
- Installation of controlled door entry systems - £1.6million
- Kitchens and bathrooms - £0.9million
- External fabric works - £7.4million
- Energy efficiency works - £5.1million
- Multi-storey flats - £1.1million
- Environmental improvements - £0.4million
- Fire precaution measures - £0.4million

The Committee approved elements of the capital investment plan that provide ways of improving housing stock beyond the requirements of the Scottish Housing Quality Standard, including replacing a number of boilers in communal premises over the next year, further investment in new house building with the addition of 25 houses a year across Perth and Kinross from 2014/15 onwards and funding for increasing the council house stock through the buying back of ex-council houses.

The Housing Revenue Account Capital Investment Programme is funded through the income from council house rents and other charges. Committee members approved a rent increase of 4.7% per cent for 2014/15. This rent increase is in line with the five year rent strategy approved in February 2013 of inflation using the Consumer Price Index (CPI) plus 2%. This represents an average weekly rent increase of £2.81 a week, giving an average weekly rent of £62.58. This keeps Perth & Kinross rent levels below the Scottish national average, and means that Perth & Kinross Council tenants pay the ninth lowest rent levels in Scotland.

Housing and Health convener, Councillor Dave Doogan, said:

"I am delighted to welcome this continued programme of significant investment in our council houses over the next five years. This work goes beyond ensuring that our properties are wind and watertight, it is also about improving the energy efficiency and security of properties to make them safe and comfortable places to live for all of our tenants. The Scottish Housing Quality Standard challenges us to ensure that all council housing meets a basic standard by March 2015, but our local Standard Delivery Plan goes beyond the requirements of the SHQS to help meet the expectations and trust tenants put in Perth & Kinross Council when they voted to retain the council as their landlord in 2003.

"Our business plan to fund these improvements is regularly reviewed to ensure that it remains affordable and sustainable. These new rent proposals are founded on sustaining this programme of substantial and ambitious improvement, while still ensuring that rents remain affordable and below the Scottish average. It also allows us to continue to commit to providing much-needed new council housing and expanding the available stock by buying-back ex-council houses of certain types and in particular areas where people are most in need of council accommodation. It also allows us to continue to commit to providing much-needed new council housing and expanding the available stock by buying-back ex-council houses of types and in areas where people are most in need of accommodation."

In March 2014, a free community event looking at a range of topics on building safer communities in Perth and Kinross took place. The event comprised a selection of plays and talks and a range of workshops that focused on a number of issues. Delegates attending the event were encouraged to explore exploitation and other community safety issues. The workshops included:

- Child safety
- Home safety visits
- Community resilience plan
- Scams
- Inclusive living
- Recovery from acute mental health
- Living an active life
- My experience of adult protection
- Living with dementia
- Recovery from substance misuse

Alex Davidson, the Council's independent convener of the adult protection committee said:

"This event builds on the achievements of Perth & Kinross Council's approach to protecting people and enhancing community safety. Success in building safer communities is beyond the ability of the justice system alone and requires the involvement of all our local communities to ensure Perth and Kinross continues to be recognised as an area which offers an excellent quality of life in one of the most attractive places to live in the United Kingdom."

Also in March 2014, the Council's Housing Convener Councillor Dave Doogan visited the site of a new development in Perth to see first-hand the properties heading towards completion. The development is a partnership project with Perth & Kinross Council, Hillcrest Housing Association Limited and Muirfield Contracts, with the Scottish Government as a major funder. The project comprises forty flats of both one and two bedroom units spread across three individual blocks – sixteen of which will be for council housing with the other 24 for Hillcrest Housing.

It is anticipated that construction work on the new homes in Jeanfield Road will be completed in July 2014. Demolition of the existing buildings on the site was carried out during March 2013 with the construction work for the ambitious housing development commencing the following month. The external construction of the walls and roofs for the flats is almost complete, and the internal construction works are well underway.

Councillor Doogan said:

“It’s great to see how well this development is progressing and, like many living locally, I remain very impressed at how quickly the flats have taken shape. Housing is one of the most important services that we as a council can offer to our communities. These new properties will make a significant and positive difference to the tenants who will make them their home. Living close to a major development such as this is not without its challenges and I wish to thank residents in the immediate area for their patience during this construction phase. As construction draws to a close however this part of the city can look forward to a much improved visual appearance compared to the derelict building that stood before it on this site. This has been a tremendously successful project to date and I am encouraged that we are looking into the possibility of constructing additional properties on the remainder of this site as funding for this becomes available.”

These examples demonstrate that Perth & Kinross Council is proactive in addressing housing issues across all tenures, building new affordable housing, improving existing council homes and strengthening communities.

AWICS has worked with the Council over a number of years in providing in-house training in Scottish social housing finance and the implications of welfare reform for housing and local government.

We are holding our annual seminar and workshop ‘All You Want to Know about Scottish social housing finance’ in Falkirk on 13th May 2014. For details please see <http://www.awics.co.uk/scotfin.asp>

Lambeth Council: Co-operatives, Development and Court Challenges

Lambeth Borough Council has a proud tradition of encouraging and empowering resident management. For example, it has established a significant number of tenant management organisations. These include Wellington Mills where AWICS has recently carried out a housing stock options appraisal and the Ethelred, Magdalen and Thorlands TMOs that AWICS has recently assisted as independent residents’ advisor in a partial stock transfer. We have also advised the Council on housing accounting matters while the Council has frequently sent delegates to our seminars and workshops.

However, the Council is now closing its housing co-operatives. Many of these co-operatives were meant to be a short life solution for long housing waiting lists and run-down properties subject to compulsory purchase orders prior to demolition in the late 1970s and early 1980s. However, some are still there today. Now, they are being sold off at auction among claims that long-existing communities are being pulled apart.

In January 2014 Lambeth residents met outside Brixton Town Hall to protest against the council's sale of housing co-operatives. At the lobby Lambeth councillors were asked to sign a pledge against the eviction of a long-term housing co-op resident. She and her family have lived in their home for 33 years. In that time she's dug a trench for mains water, installed central heating and put in a new bathroom. Her efforts have boosted the value of the small Georgian house in Stockwell from almost nothing in 1980 to around £700,000. She is among the few dozen people left in the borough's housing that was handed over to co-operatives in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

These co-operatives included people with nowhere else to go and no prospect of buying anything else. Many were on the housing waiting list and continue to be so to this day. The council stood back from these short life communities. They took over the maintenance of the houses (spending tens of thousands of pounds), running social housing at no cost to the borough. There were about thirty co-ops across Lambeth. Now only a few remain, mostly in the Clapham Town area. A few outposts remain in Stockwell, Brixton and Gypsy Hill.

In the past, the Council has stated that the co-operatives brought 'a welcome permanence and continuity to the area'. However, a few years ago, the Council decided the majority of the houses would be sold off at auction. It had found itself short of funds, and London was experiencing a property boom that made the homes hugely valuable. Sale is made by auction to the highest bidder – most reach £500,000 or more.

There are a number of critics, among them the Labour MP Kate Hoey, who said the sell-off took no account of the tenants' role in preserving and improving these assets. According to campaigners, offers to re-house residents involve joining 'Choice-Based Lettings' that they maintain is already failing most people on Lambeth's waiting list. They claim the lettings team is giving them homes in a poor condition or homes on short-term tenancies.

However, the Cabinet Member for Housing, Pete Robbins, told the 'Guardian' that it is all about priorities. He said:

"I can't prioritise this small number of people over the 1,200 people in temporary accommodation, the 15,000 people on the waiting list, who also want the opportunity for an affordable home. I don't think a secure council tenancy for life is a terrible outcome."

An example of the development that the Council is seeking can be found in a planning application that has been submitted – following a public consultation - for a new development with a fifty storey apartment building that will include around ninety affordable homes. The New Bondway development in Vauxhall, part of the Nine Elms regeneration, will contain around 450 new homes within a fifty storey tower and a smaller 23 storey tower. A four-storey glass bridge will link the two buildings. The 20% affordable homes will be a mix of different property sizes.

Developers McLaren Group said its plans to create a new residential, office and retail development will contribute to the ongoing regeneration of Nine Elms on the South Bank and the emerging cluster at Vauxhall. The development proposals include:

- 450 new homes (including 20% affordable)
- 109 car parking spaces, 22 of which will be allocated as disabled
- 578 cycle spaces
- High quality office space
- Ground floor retail units

Unit 3, Shire Hall, The Sands, Appleby in Westmorland, Cumbria. CA16 6XN.
Telephone: 017683-52165. Mobile: 07502-142658. Twitter @AdrianWaite.
E-Mail: Adrian.waite@awics.co.uk. Website: www.awics.co.uk

Managing Director: Adrian Waite MA CPFA CIHM FInstLM
Registered Address as above. Company Number: 3713554. VAT Registration Number: 721 9669 13

- 5,250m² private and communal winter gardens and roof terraces
- 2,855m² amenity space for indoor leisure uses and play rooms
- A courtyard at ground level for public amenity use.

In March 2014 Lambeth Council joined with eight other London boroughs to challenge the rent policy of the London Mayor in the High Court in a bid to protect genuinely affordable rents for local people by challenging Mayor Boris Johnson's Revised Early Minor Alterations (REMA) to the London Plan.

For many years, boroughs have been able to ensure new affordable housing is provided at rents local people can afford. Typically, in inner London that is 30% to 40% of market levels. However, the mayor is seeking to impose mandatory 'affordable' rents in new housing of up to 80% of the market rate, refusing to allow boroughs to negotiate lower rents that local people can afford.

The boroughs argue that rents at 80% of market levels will be unaffordable for many local people. They are also arguing that the Mayor of London was wrong to treat London as a single housing market, when there are in fact many different housing markets across the city.

The mayor's position runs contrary to the advice of an independent government-appointed Planning Inspector, who recommended that boroughs should keep their powers to set rents in new affordable housing.

Warm Homes Oldham

Oldham residents are benefiting from energy efficient homes after more than £1.1million was invested in the 'Warm Homes Oldham' scheme in less than six months. The pioneering scheme was initially funded by Oldham Council, NHS Oldham Clinical Commissioning Group and Oldham Housing Investment Partnership to reduce the number of people in the borough living in cold homes and to reduce fuel poverty. Now the majority of funding comes externally from the utility companies 'ECO' grants – money which can be used to pay for free boiler replacements (where residents are on eligible benefits) as well as loft and wall insulation for those living in qualifying areas.

The Warm Homes Oldham scheme is the only council backed ECO scheme and the good news is that in February 2014 the partners agreed to continue the project for another year. So far more than 800 people from across the borough have been helped out of fuel poverty. Warm Homes Oldham is also not just carrying out property improvements. In partnership with the Citizens Advice Bureau residents can access help if they need to:

- Get off a prepayment meter
- Get out of fuel debt
- Check they are claiming the correct benefits
- Help switching energy tariffs
- Apply for other grants to get boiler replacements if they are not on the correct benefits for ECO

There can be serious consequences for the health and wellbeing of those living in cold homes. By making properties in Oldham warmer the partners hope to make significant savings in other areas like health and social care.

Councillor David Hibbert, Cabinet Member for Environment and Housing, told the 'Housing News' that:

"Warm Homes Oldham is a good example of how the council is working co-operatively with its partners to improve the lives of residents across the borough. The initiative has only been running since August last year but we've already been able to help more than 800 people and attract more than £1m worth of external investment into Oldham. We have confirmed our commitment to this scheme by continuing to support it after March."

All the property upgrades will be carried out by housing and regeneration specialist Keepmoat. Nigel Banks, Group Sustainability Director at Keepmoat, said:

"Keepmoat is proud to be part of a scheme which will deliver real health benefits and improve the quality of life of residents in Oldham."

Denis Gizzi, Managing Director of Oldham Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG), said:

"Fuel poverty can and does have a huge impact on people's health, and we are delighted to support this scheme as it continues to help Oldham residents access warmer, healthier homes."

AWICS has recently completed a project for Oldham Borough Council to provide advice and financial modelling for the introduction of service charges. We have also provided in-house training in local authority housing finance while the Council has sent delegates to our seminars and workshops.

Basildon Council changes residency conditions

In March 2014 it was announced that a total of 463 people – out of 674 responses – had agreed with a new policy proposed by Basildon Council's Conservative leadership to require new tenants to have a connection with Basildon for at least seven years before getting a council house rather than the current requirement of three years. The council is to apply new rules to its waiting list which will mean residents who were born in the borough and have lived there for at least the last seven years will be given top priority.

In comparison, neighbouring Southend Council insists new tenants have a link to the area for three years, while in Rochford it is currently two years.

The move by Basildon Council is designed to ease up space on the council's housing register, with close to 3,000 people last month being high priority cases on the waiting list. Phil Turner, Basildon Council's deputy leader and councillor responsible for housing told the 'Housing News' that:

"This is Basildon homes for Basildon people. It is harsh, but it demonstrates our administration's commitment to local people. Three years' local connection is not enough."

Housing managers claim this could cut the number of people on the waiting list by half. Members of the armed forces, their families and bereaved partners will be the only people who do not have to prove a local connection. Priority will also be given to those working and volunteering in the borough.

The authority will also help 'under-occupying' social housing tenants hit by the bedroom tax to move and will introduce new rules that ensure people are not allocated homes they do not need or cannot afford.

Councillor Phil Turner, deputy leader of the council and cabinet member for housing, said:

“Basildon Homes for Basildon People means that it is our aim is to maximise the choice and access for our eligible residents that need a home for them and their families. The new scheme will improve the way we allocate homes and bring fairness and simplicity to the process. The policy will include members of the armed forces and their families and these changes will ensure that we continue to our support troops whether they have a connection to Basildon or not. We are proud to be recognising the armed forces in this scheme but we also want Basildon homes for Basildon people and for hardworking families and those who were born and have lived in the borough for a number of years to benefit.”

The trend to increase residency requirements for those wishing to let social and affordable housing is yet another implication of the current shortage of social and affordable housing.

AWICS has assisted Basildon Borough Council with a housing stock options appraisal, business planning and the implementation of self-financing.

The AWICS Housing News is published by 'AWICS' Limited. However, the views expressed in articles are not necessarily those of 'AWICS' or Adrian Waite.

About 'AWICS'

'AWICS' is a management consultancy and training company. We specialise in providing support in finance and management to clients in local government and housing in England, Scotland and Wales. We are well known for our ability to analyse and explain complex financial and management issues clearly.

Our mission statement is 'Independence, Integrity, Value'. We therefore provide support to clients from an independent standpoint that is designed to help the client to achieve their objectives. We are passionate about working with the utmost integrity. We believe that we offer the best value for money that is available today!

For more information about us and our services please visit our website at www.awics.co.uk or contact Adrian Waite at Adrian.waite@awics.co.uk

Services that we offer include:

- Management Consultancy – <http://www.awics.co.uk/ManagementConsultancy.asp>
- Interim Management – <http://www.awics.co.uk/interimmanagement.asp>
- Regional Seminars - <http://www.awics.co.uk/seminars2014.asp>
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Telephone: 017683-52165. Mobile: 07502-142658. Twitter @AdrianWaite.
E-Mail: Adrian.waite@awics.co.uk. Website: www.awics.co.uk

Managing Director: Adrian Waite MA CPFA CIHM FInstLM
Registered Address as above. Company Number: 3713554. VAT Registration Number: 721 9669 13

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NATIONAL HOUSING FEDERATION

Housing Finance Conference and Exhibition

19 - 20 March 2014, University of Warwick, Coventry

Attend the housing finance event of the year to get to grips with the latest opportunities and risks that are facing the sector – and how you should be preparing for them.

Key speakers include:

- Magnus Lindkvist, Trendspotter and Founder, Pattern Recognition
- Douglas McWilliams, Executive Chairman, Centre for Economics and Business Research (CEBR)
- Jonathan Walters, Deputy Director of Strategy and Performance, Homes and Communities Agency
- Clive Barnett, Managing Director, Head of Housing Finance, The Royal Bank of Scotland
- Fenella Edge, Treasurer, The Housing Finance Corporation
- Steve Punt, Writer and Comedian, BBC Radio 4's The Now Show and Mock the Week

Why attend?

- Visit the largest **housing finance exhibition** in the UK with the latest innovations and products
- Attend the new **conference networking dinner** for good food, good company and a bit of comedic entertainment *
- Attend a **wide range of sessions under one roof** covering the topics that affect you, your association and your tenants
- Gain insight from **key policymakers** and have your say in **topical debates** to share **best practice** and new ideas
- Network and make new contacts at the **drinks reception** and **after party**

Who should attend?

- Finance directors, managers and staff
- Chief executives
- Board members interested in the financial workings of their association
- Chairs of housing association boards
- Lenders, commercial organisations and public service providers
- Anyone with an interest in the financial running of their organisation

Fees: Federation member £735, Associate member £845, Non-member £915, Day delegate price from £520

For more information visit: www.housing.org.uk/finance

Unit 3, Shire Hall, The Sands, Appleby in Westmorland, Cumbria. CA16 6XN.
Telephone: 017683-52165. Mobile: 07502-142658. Twitter @AdrianWaite.
E-Mail: Adrian.waite@awics.co.uk. Website: www.awics.co.uk

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NATIONAL HOUSING FEDERATION

Regulation Conference 2014; Regulation in a changing world

30 April 2014, Doubletree by Hilton, **London West End**

8 May 2014, Renaissance Hotel, **Manchester**

How can regulation remain effective and relevant, and still allow the sector to evolve? Join us at the Regulation Conference in London or Manchester, which will put the current proposals to revise the standards into the broader context of regulatory development, and set the likely direction of future travel

Key speakers include:

- **Julian Ashby**, Chair, Regulation Committee, HCA (London)
- **Matthew Bailes**, Executive Director, Regulation, HCA (Manchester)
- **James Tickell**, Director, Campbell Tickell
- **Clare Miller**, Group Director of Governance, Affinity Sutton

Why attend?

- Be first to hear the HCA's thinking on current proposals and wider process of change
- Directly question the experts on the regulatory pressures and drivers for change
- Two dates available – London or Manchester
- Network with other housing associations and share ideas

Who should attend?

- Chief executives
- Chairs
- Finance managers and directors
- Operations directors and managers
- Risk managers

Fees: Member £275, Associate member £315, Non-member £345

For more information visit: <http://www.housing.org.uk/events/browse/regulation-conference-2014-london>

**IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO PLACE AN ADVERTISEMENT IN THE AWICS HOUSING NEWS
PLEASE CONTACT Adrian.waite@awics.co.uk**

Unit 3, Shire Hall, The Sands, Appleby in Westmorland, Cumbria. CA16 6XN.
Telephone: 017683-52165. Mobile: 07502-142658. Twitter @AdrianWaite.
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All You Want To Know About Service Charges

April 2014

We are holding our seminar and workshop 'All You Want to Know about Service Charges' in April. This seminar and workshop is designed to give an introduction and overview to this important subject and is fully up to date with all developments.

Service charges are an integral part of landlords' work in financing value for money services and sustaining customer satisfaction. They have always been relatively complex but with landlords, leaseholders and tenants facing increased financial challenges and with increased legal complexity there is an increased need to understand how service charging works.



Flats in China Walk, Lambeth.

This seminar and workshop is presented mainly from a financial point of view and is designed for people who are not experts in service charges, but who need to understand the basics and achieve an overview of what is going on. It is suitable for councillors, board members, housing managers, finance staff, tenant representatives, members of the service charges team who have limited experience and others who realise that an understanding of service charges can place them at an advantage!

We believe in quality rather than quantity and so numbers at each session are limited to twenty people to permit the maximum possible interaction and participation.

What the Session Covers:

The session will answer the following questions:

- How do Service Charges work:
 - In Housing Associations and Local Authorities?
 - For Leaseholders and Tenants?
- How are service charges calculated?
- How to de-pool service charges?
- When are service charges eligible for housing benefit?
- How to ensure excellent customer service?

The session includes a participatory case study and is accompanied by a very useful 100 page book that is designed for reference after the session entitled:

“All You Want To Know About Service Charges”

Venue and Date:

London: Novotel Hotel, Waterloo – 29th April 2014.

For more information or to book a place, please visit: <http://www.awics.co.uk/schs.asp>

This seminar and workshop is also available in-house. For further information about in-house sessions, please contact Adrian Waite on 017683-52165 or adrian.waite@awics.co.uk

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